CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

ADULT LEARNING CENTRES IN MANITOBA

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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PART ONE: THE CENTRES AS THEY ARE NOW

INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper was commissioned by Dr. Ben Levin, deputy minister of Education and Training, to provide him with impressions of the adult learning centres which have developed in Manitoba over the last few years. Subsequently, at a meeting held with school superintendents and adult learning centre staff on the 28th. of January, it was decided that this paper would be made available to superintendents and centre staff as well. Thus, this paper is designed not only to give an impression of the adult learning centres, but also to provide readers with some suggestions as to the development of the centres in the future, and it may serve as a first stage in a dialogue between the Department and adult education deliverers.

I was not asked to conduct a review or an evaluation of adult learning centres; neither could have been accomplished in the time available, but to provide impressions. Therefore, the paper is less formal or academic in style than otherwise would be the case, and, naturally, represents an individual response to a set of adult learning initiatives. To some extent then, this paper is an expression of my own views and attitudes towards adult education, but at least those attitudes were largely formed in a Manitoba context over a fairly long period of time.

In the course of four weeks visiting a number, but by no means all, of the centres, I met many adult educators and enjoyed and gained from the experience greatly. I respected and admired their commitment and dedication, and engaged in many discussions about the nature of adult learning. While I am confident that a number of the views expressed in the paper will be shared by these educators, the impressions set out here are mine; I have not set out to relay or interpret other people's opinions other than in the context of looking at issues or anomalies that the centres give rise to.

Finally, in the course of visiting centres and talking to people I could not disguise my enthusiasm for what is taking place. Adult learning centres are, I believe, the most innovative and progressive responses to a huge need for a range of adult education delivery that I have experienced. They are exciting in educational terms, employing a variety of educational strategies to engage learners who have been uninvolved in education; and, on a societal basis, seem to me to be moving people from dependence to independence in greater numbers and on a firmer footing than ever before in Manitoba.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Adult education is difficult to define: not post-secondary education, although an increasing number of students at post-secondary institutions are mature students; not continuing education, where most, but not all, learners are adults pursuing further education after obtaining some sort of qualification; not high school education, although there are many adults pursuing a high school graduation diploma.

Adult education, however it is defined, has often had a large training component attached to it. Much of this training activity, although not all, has often been designed to adjust unemployed adults to the labour force. Adult education has often been seen as performing a *remedial* function, either in terms of upgrading academic skills or overcoming an individual's supposed deficiencies in terms of the labour market.

Training activities, largely because of their funding sources, have often been characterized by rules and regulations which have specified who is eligible for what forms of training or education. These rules have often been restrictive and inflexible.

Adult education and training has been delivered by a variety of providers: directly by governments; by colleges; by private educational institutions; by school divisions; by community organizations. No overall policy, strategy, or co-ordinating mechanism has ever existed for adult education. Nor, with the best will in the world, could one say that any part of this unco-ordinated set of activities had been particularly successful at moving people from dependence to independence. This is not to say that there have not been innovative and successful adult education programs nor dedicated teachers; merely that they have often been at the margins.

Until about five years ago, and more particularly since the last two years, there was no province wide system of adult education provision that concentrated upon learners' needs. There isn't such a system now, but Manitoba is much closer to this than ever before.

The genesis of the adult learning centres is an interesting phenomenon, and worth some discussion, not in order to write history, but to illustrate how many of the strengths displayed by the centres, as well as some of the anomalies in funding and delivery, arose.

There is no evidence at all that the ALCs developed as a result of considered policy development by the government of the day, nor that there had been a particular identification of needs to be met. Further, no policy was considered for a local, community driven, decentralized,

flexible, province wide array of centres designed to meet multiple adult learning needs. The term, "adult learning centre", was devised after the event to describe a variety of programs that had sprung up. Thus, there was no prior discussion within government as to the concept, form, or function of an adult learning centre.

The major policy shift of providing free high school level, and related courses, to adults seems to have occurred with the minimum of discussion.

The department of Education and Training was, to a large extent, not involved in the development of the centres, although certain departmental officials have supported and assisted centres after they were established.

Thus, the origin of the centres appears to have been an unplanned, unforeseen phenomenon, with the change in schools funding formula acting like the sorcerer's apprentice unleashing a flood of water. The change in the funding formula, allowing school divisions to deliver, or cause to be delivered, free high school education for adults unleashed a wave of programming. Since there was no central model or concept for a centre, centres developed very much in relation to the needs of the communities they serve, and both the range of services and the modes of delivery were largely locally determined.

On the whole, then, the results of what most unbiased observers would describe as a public administration fiasco have been positive and constructive, and surely would have been lauded if they had been planned and intended. The manner in which the centres were enabled has also left some anomalies, chiefly in terms of the inappropriateness of the funding formula, most of which can be either dealt with or lived with, and which will be examined in more detail below.

Although the local and community development of centres has been a distinct advantage, not least because we are able to see, consider, and share information about different approaches, there is one common element among centres that, while again neither planned nor centrally inspired, underpins the whole initiative, and that is the learner friendly, learner centred philosophy that imbues all the centres that I have seen.

The only explanation that I can come up with for this is that professional educators were given almost a blank screen upon which to devise programming. The overwhelming sense of respect for the adult learner, and the learner's potential is an educational philosophy and attitude expressed in every centre I visited. Educators invented the centres because the bureaucrats had inadvertently been left behind in the bushes.

Two important consequences flow from this attitude: first, the centres adapt to the needs of adult learners, rather than is often the case expecting learners to adapt to institutional requirements that are more about organizational and management imperatives than educational philosophy; second, the centres' attitude towards learners is of their potential, of their futures, and thus lacks all the paternalism and condescension that sometimes attaches to remedial education.

Finally, the centres responded to an unmet need of huge proportions. This will be addressed below, but it is important to emphasize that I have no impression that need has been manufactured. The combination of free tuition, local delivery, welcoming attitudes, flexibility of delivery, all combined to produce considerable numbers of adult learners out of the woodwork. There is little evidence that these numbers will diminish significantly in the near future. Technology, too has been an influence and this also will be addressed below.

In summary, adult learning centres have sprung up into the policy and programming void of adult education, have established a constructive and effective philosophy of education, and have the potential to become an adult education system that the province has always lacked.

NEED

1996 census data is not particularly helpful in establishing the extent of adult education need in Manitoba, largely because numbers of people without Grade 12 standing is not specifically identified. However, the following figures are perhaps indicative:

All persons 15 years old and over: 855,880

Of this group, numbers without high school certificate: 353,910

Percentage of population 25 and over with less than Gr.9: 14.8

Illustrative data for selected rural and urban centres, in the same order as above are:

Altona:	2525; 1470; 35.9
Turtle Mountain rural municipality:	905; 430; 13.3
Killarney:	1745; 770; 14.8
Brandon:	30590; 11235; 10.0
Winnipeg:	488470; 171560; 10.6

The category of 15 year olds and over is not helpful because obviously a proportion of the numbers without a high school certificate are in school. However, there is clearly a need to engage a significant number of adults with less than high school certification in adult education.

THE CENTRES

The following educational activities can be found in centres:

- literacy
- elementary upgrading
- high school preparation
- high school courses
- high school mature student diploma courses
- dual credit, high school and post-secondary courses
- post-secondary courses
- computer courses
- employment related courses
- combinations of academic and on the job training
- retraining of laid off workers
- tailor made training of currently employed workers
- development of web based courses
- parent training
- pre-school education
- pre-apprenticeship training

Not all centres, in fact no one centre, offer this complete range of programming. Some work with local literacy centres for example; some "specialize" in high school programming. Some centres have day care facilities. Some centres provide an alternative high school to teenagers who have been referred by the local high school.

The following instructional methodologies can be found:

- traditional classroom instruction
- individualized computer assisted instruction
- individualized programs
- combinations of the above

Some centres have rules for attendance and others have sophisticated entrance testing. Others accept anyone regardless of prior academic standing. Most centres provide learning supports of some kind, e.g.

counseling support, career guidance. Some centres co-operate in referring learners among themselves to appropriate supports and programming. Some centres co-operate on a regional basis, and are starting to explore extending services to learners in smaller and smaller communities. Some centres have close working arrangements with local businesses and employers. The majority of centres work out of "store front" premises, and present a non-institutional face to the world.

The following governing structures can be found:

- community boards
- consortia, eg. school division, college and centre
- school division administered
- school division and community partner

The community partner may be organized as:

- not for profit organization, incorporated or unincorporated
- for profit organization, registered as private vocational school
- for profit organization, unregistered

In some cases the "community" is easily defined, particularly in rural areas, and community interests may be represented on a learning centre board. In other cases the community is a neighbourhood within Winnipeg outside of which learners are reluctant to move. It should be noted that there is a perceived difference between the adult learning centre, which might be described as being of the community, and extension services of other educational services which might be described as being in the community.

The role of school divisions:

The nature of the funding that made adult learning centres possible requires that school divisions receive the funding and then directly administer centres or pass through the funds for partners to administer. Divisions also play a crucial role in validating learners' high school certificates.

Some school divisions have involved themselves wholeheartedly, others with some caution, and others not at all. In the latter category, some superintendents have resisted pressure to become involved on deeply felt grounds that public monies should be applied to public education and that a "profit" factor, that is an administration fee, is unethical. Other superintendents asked for a level playing field, feeling

that some divisions had been favoured over others in establishing new adult education initiatives.

All of these issues could be resolved quite easily if there were changes to the funding formula, and these will be discussed below. In essence though, a system would be helpful that allowed those school divisions which wished to be involved to do so, and which could fund centres in areas where school divisions did not wish to be involved.

In the latter case, however, some means would need to be found of validating the learners' academic achievements.

The role of the federal government:

Some centres have received funding through HRDC, particularly in terms of investment in technology.

The role of teachers:

If a number of the learners might be described as refugees from the school system, the same might be said of some of the teachers involved with the centres. Over 100 qualified teachers are employed among the centres as well as teaching assistants and counselors. Teaching people who are ready to learn can be a most rewarding experience, and teachers I spoke to appeared to be enthusiastic about the work they were doing. It should also be noted that an association of adult educators has recently been formed which includes representation from many of the centres as well as representatives from other adult education providers. This is an advocacy group not only for its members but also for the centres, and could play a most constructive role in the future.

The role of technology:

Technology is central to the operation of the centres. Some centres term themselves etech centres and provide access to computer training to a wide variety of people in the communities they serve. Computer assisted learning is used in a number of centres. A number of learners told me that they had been totally unfamiliar with computers before joining a centre, and the need to become familiar was the motivation for a number of learners. Access to computers is one of the benefits of the centres, particularly as computer literacy is becoming one of the major factors in determining who is in and who is out of the economy. There are educational issues around the use of computers, particularly in terms of computer assisted learning, but their use in the centres is in fact empowering a wide range of people who would otherwise remain outside the economy.

The role of literacy programming:

Many centres have connections with community provided literacy instruction so that learners can move from literacy to the centres with ease. However, funding for literacy is inadequate, and literacy programs are reliant upon charity in some cases to stay open. Given the need for literacy programming and it's importance as a basis for further learning, some attention might be paid to integrating literacy instruction as a central function of the centres, even if the centres contract that work out to existing literacy programs. Thus, literacy funding and programming becomes an integrated part of adult education provision.

In summary, the centres display a wide range of programming and approaches and are organized and administered in a variety of ways.

Some centres are established, some still evolving. Most people involved with the centres recognize a need to pause for breath, to take stock, to tidy up some of the anomalies, but the dynamism should be nurtured, and the autonomy of centres should be preserved. The centres raise a number of important educational issues, and these will be discussed in the next section.

However, the inescapable conclusion is that over 6,000 Manitobans in adult learning centres this year will be involved in learning, and are acquiring skills and qualifications that will equip them for either employment or further education, or both, and that many if not most of these learners would not have been involved if the centres did not exist.

THE LEARNERS

The ages of learners range from 16 to 80. Most are probably between the ages of 18 and 40. Most, but by no means all, are pursuing a high school credential in order to improve their chances for employment or to carry on to post-secondary education. Many are on social assistance or EI.

The centres have a wealth of data on the characteristics of learners, and, of outcomes of their educational experience in the centres. This data is not collected or analyzed anywhere. One of the many advantages of maintaining and strengthening the centres would be to co-ordinate data gathering. My strong impression is that centres are succeeding in moving people from dependence to independence; this impression should be verified.

The above does not adequately describe the learning atmosphere of centres, nor will the following vignettes, but they might provide a flavour.

A 16 year old young man, expelled from school, sits at a computer next to 25 year old woman. She and her husband, who is employed, never finished Grade 12. She considers that she did not do herself justice at school, and is completing her high school diploma. A 22 year old single parent on social assistance is doing a computer assisted math course with a 2 week old baby on her knee. A business woman in a small town is taking computer courses in order to make her business more efficient. A young man on worker's compensation is taking the two high school credits he needs to graduate. A 65 year old man, just retired after working for 50 years, is completing one of his life's ambitions... getting his high school diploma. An EI recipient is doing a pre-apprenticeship course with a practicum refurbishing inner city housing. A young man in a rural centre is taking post-secondary courses through Campus Manitoba. A mother is taking Grade 12 in order to challenge her teenage son to do so also.

Not all these examples are drawn from one centre. However, in every centre it is possible to see adults of all ages learning together. It is an edifying spectacle. Learning, as a worthwhile activity, as well as a means to an end, is clearly taking place.

Centres display a co-operative learning environment, there is camaraderie across age groups, and there is a sense of people overcoming their fear of learning together, and very much celebrating, and being inspired by, the success of others.

Some centres have attached day care facilities, some don't. Space is shared: a seminar room doubles as a toy lending library and a parent education room.

PART TWO: ISSUES ARISING

The adult learning centres are like a vast adult educational laboratory; the activity is well worth examining more closely both from an educational and public policy point of view. The impression I have of a largely successful educational enterprise has implications for other parts of the educational system. This section of the paper will raise and discuss some of these issues.

1. Readiness to learn.

Educators have long known that our public school system works better for some children than for others. We know that some children for economic, social, cultural, reasons do not succeed within the parameters of success as defined by our schools. About one quarter of students in our schools do not graduate.

We also know that lack of success in school can mark people for life. High school graduation is one, and perhaps the first, qualification that separates people into what many perceive as winners and losers. Lack of self esteem as well as lack of skills and credentials limits the opportunities of those who do not graduate. A lingering distrust and fear of educational institutions is also one of the legacies of not graduating.

The centres are providing a second chance to significant numbers of people whom the schools could not engage in learning. An interesting comment from two young women, not far removed in age from high school students, was in response to a question about whether they would be willing to take their courses at the high school they had once attended: "No, the kids there are not serious; school's a social event, we're here to learn." !

There are also people who appear to have not been ready to learn while in school. A number of learners told me that they didn't blame their schools for their failure to graduate. "I wasn't ready, I wanted to party", was one statement. However, our educational institutions tend not to be designed for people who are not ready on schedule. This is a broad statement, and there are exceptions, but, in general, our educational institutions have never recognized as a matter of educational principle that people may become ready to learn at any time. As a result, many people who do not graduate from high school are labeled, as much as by themselves as by others, as having no educational potential. This is very different from saying to someone, "you have potential, but you have not yet shown it."

One of the uniform features of the wide array of adult learning centres is that there is an expectation that when someone is ready to learn they will be encouraged and assisted to reach their potential.

Many of the learners in the centres are ready to learn. Most learners are at the centres because they want to be not because they have to be. Not all are ready at once, but because the centres are, within the limitation of their budgets, open to everyone, it is possible for people to come back again when they are ready, and there are a number of instances of this occurring.

Also, there is more than one measure of success. The learner who moves from functional illiteracy to literacy, the learner who moves from an elementary level to be able to undertake high school or employment training are valid successes.

Thus, it seems to me that the centres have established in practice a valuable educational principle: not everyone is ready to learn at the same time, but everyone is ready to learn sometime. It also seems to

me that the centres because of their number and variety and community basis are close to being able to say, "when you are ready, we are here."

We are close now in Manitoba to be able to say that we have an educational system that allows people to learn when they are ready...no small achievement.

2. Implications for other educational deliverers.

One comment about the adult learning centres is that they are alternative high schools ten, twenty or thirty years too late. There is some truth in this comment, but it is difficult to conceive of a revolutionary change in the public school system that would allow them to become as flexible as the centres are in order to accommodate a variety of learning styles as well as readiness to learn.

It would be useful though for schools to know about the success of the adult learning centres, so at the very least they can communicate to students that there is hope and opportunity in their future. Some may claim that this is an inducement for students to drop out, but as this happens anyway the argument seems to lack force. Also, there are approaches used in the centres that may have application in schools, particularly in independent learning systems for those who can't cope with a traditional classroom approach.

However, it seems to me that the centres could have most impact, in a constructive way, on the post-secondary institutions. The proportion of mature students in post-secondary institutions has been increasing, and, in some cases, is close to 50% of the total student population of the institution. At the same time, drop out rates in a number of post-secondary courses are unacceptably high, particularly among mature students.

Post-secondary institutions have begun to address this issue and are looking at and establishing student success strategies of various kinds. This is both necessary and constructive, and I do not mean to suggest that the centres should have a role in absolving the post-secondary institutions of those initiatives. However, the experience at the Brandon adult learning centre may be particularly instructive. There, the partnership is between Assiniboine Community College, Brandon School Division, and the centre.

Assiniboine's participation stemmed from disappointment in their own success at preparing adult learners for college programs. Instead they have invested money in the adult learning centre. To date, 68 adults have achieved their high school diploma and gone on to the college.

The impression, and this impression will be checked, is that those students are doing better in college courses than mature students who have not been through the centre.

It is likely that the centre is accepting and graduating learners who actually never conceived of moving on to post-secondary education. Few, if any, see the centre as a means of entering and succeeding at college until they are within the centre. Yet, significant numbers are doing just that. There are probably two reasons why this is happening: the centre is a store front, non-institutional environment that welcomes rather then deters learners; there is some variety in educational methodologies.

Again, I am not suggesting that colleges give up their resources in this area to the centres, not least because the relationship between Assiniboine and the centre is assisted by their proximity. However, the post-secondary institutions might well gain by examining the approaches used by the centres, and the role that many of the centres play, in part, in preparing adults for further study should be recognized and validated.

Another aspect of the centre/post-secondary relationship is the opportunity for adults at centres to begin their post-secondary experience within the centre. There are some instances of dual credit courses being offered at some centres, i.e. high school/post-secondary, while technology has made it possible for adults in rural areas to undertake their studies through Campus Manitoba. A terminal, desk and chair, represents the post-secondary aspect of one of the rural centres, an aspect of which they are rightfully proud.

The educational activity in the centres also impacts upon faculties of education. To wonder if the faculties are even aware of the liveliness of the educational philosophy and practice evidenced in the centres is perhaps displaying a personal bias. However, at the very least, faculties should consider practicum placements for student teachers in the centres.

Time did not allow visits to northern centres, within Frontier School division, and in The Pas and Thompson, although I did speak to some individuals involved. There has been discussion over the last few years about the form and nature of post-secondary education in the north. The centres seem to me to be ideal models for northern communities because of the flexibility of approach and the wide range of adult education services they supply.

This discussion would not be complete without addressing the fact that mature students at post-secondary institutions do not require high

school graduation to enter. This raises the issue of the concentration upon high school graduation in many of the centres.

3. The high school diploma.

High school graduation or achievement of the high school diploma is a recognized credential. Many learners in the centres want it, and they don't want an alternative. GED is available in some centres but its popularity seems to be waning. Most learners want the credential because it is a passport to employment; some see it as an indispensable base for further study. Others see its achievement as an important symbol of personal accomplishment.

At the same time, high school graduation is of limited value in communicating to employers or post-secondary institutions either the nature of someone's knowledge, skills and ability, except in the broadest terms, or of indicating someone's potential to learn. We know that mature students without Grade 12 standing can succeed at post-secondary institutions, especially when academic upgrading is provided in the context of their post-secondary courses.

Also, adults have had experiences from which they have learned, maturity, and, often, a degree of ambition based upon a realization that they have a second chance. The high school diploma does not communicate these qualities.

Some centre staff see the current high school diploma requirements as being too inflexible; that there should be credit for community involvement and extra curricular experience; that there should be a challenge component. It was noted that the recent requirement of the Apprenticeship Board for Grade 12 as an entry to apprenticeship was a retrograde step in keeping out people who had the potential to learn a trade.

I am not suggesting that the high school diploma should be replaced, but that the centres consider the development of an additional credential, perhaps a portfolio of academic and other accomplishments and qualities that the learner has demonstrated.

Departmental officials have been working on more flexible approaches to curriculum and packaging of courses. Such work has not been validated over the last few years and it is to be hoped that the new government will examine these proposals more seriously.

The extension of the requirement for the mature student diploma from 6 to 8 courses has had at least one negative effect upon learners. It is virtually impossible to complete these requirements within one year,

which means that those learners who rely upon social assistance find themselves without support to complete their program because of social service regulations limiting support to one year for educational purposes. This is a matter that should be taken up between the departments of Education and of Family Services.

4. Economic implications

If indeed one's impression that the centres are moving people more effectively from dependence to independence than any other system, it may be in the interests of Family Services to amend its regulations.

However, not only does one's impression need checking, but also a wider economic analysis of the centres would be worthwhile. As mentioned above, there is a wealth of ungathered, uncollated, and unanalyzed data available in the centres. I think it would be useful for the centres to work in some way with Treasury Board to undertake an economic study of the centres, and I make this suggestion from the point of view that I believe such a study would be very much in the interests of the centres.

We appear to have, almost, an adult education system that seems to be working, that is, educating people effectively, providing them with valid credentials, and preparing them for both employment and/or further study. Since the centres are essentially community based, share resources with other partners, do not require expensive buildings, and do not require an extensive bureaucracy to support them, my guess is that dollar for dollar they are as or more effective than other forms of delivery. It would be useful for the centres and for government to know that such is the case.

However, there are other factors. It would be useful to at least estimate the economic contribution of centres in communities, especially perhaps rural communities, both from their very existence in the community and their ability to generate economic activity as a result of their programs.

5. Funding

Everyone I spoke to indicated that the current funding structure is inappropriate not least because the September 30th. cut off date for registering students does not fit the continuous intake model that most centres follow. Also, the current structure requires school divisions to be involved. In many cases this is not an issue where centres and divisions have cooperative relationships. In some cases though this is

an issue, and, particularly when looking at how centres might be established in areas currently not served or where school divisions for their own good reasons do not wish to be involved, the current structure acts as a restraint.

Some suggestions for discussion on this matter and others will be set out below, but any change in the system should allow divisions who wish to be involved to continue to be so.

6. *The Department of Education and Training.*

The experience the department has been through over the last few months regarding the centres might be compared to that of a parent suddenly discovering a progeny, and a precocious one at that, of which he was formerly unaware, and which he has to support financially to no absolute limit.

I must say that the department has largely dealt with this discovery with some grace. It must have been tempting to disavow the offspring on the grounds that it was fathered by others. The department has chosen, I think wisely, to examine the centres on their merits. However, the existence of the centres raises a number of issues for the department regarding the nature of its relationship with the centres as well as with its own adult education delivery system.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, adult education has been largely a marginal activity existing somewhere in the shadows of the school, post-secondary, and social service systems, even though the extent of the need for programs demanded a more rational and organized response.

The centres have radically changed that situation. There is now at hand a third strand of educational provision in the province occupying a legitimate place alongside the school and post-secondary systems. It is an educational response to a huge need, and its educational basis seems to me to be its greatest strength. The centres are not an expression of social service policy engineering designed to adapt people to society. They are not remedial services designed to help the slow to catch up. They are sound educational responses to people who want and are ready to learn. From this many social and economic benefits accrue of course.

Thus, the first implication for the department is to deal with the policy issue: to confirm or deny the third strand of provision.

The second, it seems to me, is to evaluate existing adult education and training programming delivered by the department in the light of the

experience of the centres. It would be foolish to anticipate that analysis and debate, but I would be very surprised if it were not possible to have a more effective adult learning system in the province, based upon funding existing centres sufficiently and establishing new centres where they are needed, within existing departmental resources for adult education.

The third implication, which does not require a complete resolution of the first two issues, is the nature of the relationship between the department and the centres. To date, it has been an arm's length relationship based upon funding, and, to some extent, a second hand relationship with divisions rather than centres, although departmental officials have been helpful to centres in a somewhat informal way.

My own view is that an opportunity exists to establish a partnership between the department and centres that could be mutually beneficial, and certainly the department has made clear its willingness to work with the centres to examine how this might work.

So, there are challenges for all involved, and the last section of this paper deals with how constructive change might be discussed.

PART THREE: CHANGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Some anomalies in the way the centres function need to be attended to, particularly in terms of funding, but If the full potential of the centres is to be realized a number of issues need to be discussed. The issues are inter-related, but the major question is should, and how, a series of largely autonomous and independent centres evolve into a third strand of educational provision in the province? The resolution of those questions is a matter for the centres and the department to address together; what follows are ideas for discussion.

1. Funding.

A number of possibilities exist for alternative funding structures:

a. Some form of voucher system whereby learners determine what programs in which centres they will purchase. Philosophically this is perhaps the "purest" approach, although in rural areas the reality is that there is not much choice.
b. Funding is still provided through the school divisions, although the September 30th. registration date is removed.
c. Centres are funded directly on some form of per student cost basis.
d. Centres are funded directly on some form of cost for service basis, i.e. a price is attached to computer assisted learning, to traditional classroom approach, to counseling supports.

e. Some combination of the above.

Ideally, funding should provide both effective programming and accountability. Perhaps the simplest approach is to establish the 2000/2001 centre allocation as a base budget with the centre contracting to provide specific services. Within that budget the centre has the flexibility to determine its own priorities over the year.

It should be noted that funding centres directly, rather than through school divisions, does not mean that divisions do not have to be involved, or should not be involved. Centres may still, if they choose, purchase services from school divisions, teachers may still be employed by school divisions, and school divisions may still grant the credential to learners.

Some people have been critical of the role of private educational organizations in program delivery. There is a strong sentiment regarding public funds not serving a private interest. It should be noted that over the last ten years, as public funds for education shrank, and needs went unmet, private educational organizations to some extent filled a void. However, one way of dealing with this issue is to propose that private educational organizations act as not for profit agencies for those activities funded by public resources, leaving them free to engage in for profit activities with private purchasers. Some private agencies are registered as private vocational schools. This is something all private providers might consider if only because some protection is provided to learners for continuing their programs in the event that an organization goes bankrupt.

The question also arises as to where from the department the funding emanates. To date, of course, the funding has come through the schools finance branch. It could equally as well come from the training side of the department. Again, ideally, as will be discussed below, a new funding source could be created in the department.

2. The evolution of the centres.

The word "evolution" is used deliberately. The centres are relatively new and should be allowed to evolve rather than to be forced into a "one model" approach. However, the success and the scope of the centres requires some change to take place.

To what degree can the centres work together and with the department to determine their futures? How might they work together, and do they have the resources to work together? Are there

too many centres for them to work together effectively? Is it worth considering a functional split between rural and urban centres?

A first and necessary stage might be for representatives of the centres and representatives from the department to develop principles and operating guidelines for the centres. These would set out the overarching principles such as the validity of the third strand of provision, respect for learners and their potential, the community basis for delivery, flexibility of approach, and the autonomy of centres etc. Guidelines could deal with such matters as community boards, accountability mechanisms, professional standards etc.

Such a document might form the cornerstone of the relationship between the centres and the department and of a contract, either between the centres as an association of centres and the department, or between individual centres and the department.

There is some value, for everyone involved, in sharing the wealth of the centres. It would be valuable for educators to meet, discuss and share their experiences. It would be valuable to constructively evaluate various forms of instructional methodology, learner support systems, community relationships, institutional relationships. It would be valuable for all concerned to establish outcome guidelines, collect and analyze data, and undertake cost-benefit analyses. It would be valuable to establish professional development opportunities across the centres. It would be valuable to share experiences and innovations in the use of technology. There are important educational issues to be discussed.

At the moment there is no mechanism or forum to do this, although ASEC, the adult educators association has made a start.

How might this be done? Two or three possibilities come to mind. The centres form a legal association and undertake these tasks themselves with funds allocated for the purpose. In this model, the association has its own staff to carry out these responsibilities. Again, a rural/urban split might be considered to reflect different realities and to make the process more manageable.

A second model is for the department to establish an adult education secretariat which acts as the advocate for the centres and carries out the tasks identified. A third model is some sort of hybrid of the first two. In any event, by whatever model, the advocacy power of the centres is enhanced.

Speaking from experience, there is some value in having a centre within the department that is mandated to support and nurture the

adult learning movement. Equally, the autonomy and flexibility of centres must be retained.

Not all these issues need to be resolved at once, although it would be useful to have a mutually agreeable funding mechanism in place for the next fiscal year. One possibility is to consider a joint working group of centre and departmental representatives to develop an agenda and priorities.

3. The department.

The department has also to think through what it is going to do with this unsought, unplanned, and unexpected gift that is the centres. The department has pledged its commitment to work with the centres to determine future directions.

At the same time, the department has to consider its own policies and programs with regard to adult learning. The centres represent a persuasive educational philosophy and an extensive set of programs in practice. This is unprecedented! Normally, the department establishes policy!

The challenge for the department is to deal with a set of activities the potential of which is much greater than the sum of its parts. Again, in my view, the economic benefits accruing from the centres represents an important factor in these considerations.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this discussion paper I wrote that I would be setting out my impressions of the centres and the issues that surrounded them, and, further, that such an impressionistic paper would reflect, inevitably, my own experience and values. Clearly, in the four weeks visiting centres and the people working in them, and in the two weeks thinking and writing about the centres, I have become an advocate.

I hope that putting that advocacy more directly in the context of my own experience will not be regarded as self indulgence; my purpose is to be clear about the reasons why I think the centres are valuable. For most of the nearly thirty years I spent in Manitoba I was involved in adult education and post-secondary programs that were designed to provide opportunities to people who had potential and who lacked the normal academic pre-requisites for the programs they were involved with. The programs were by and large successful and the experience

of working with them was rewarding. However, what we were really doing was trying to by-pass the institutional and bureaucratic barriers placed in the way of learners. We were successful in doing this only because these initiatives were accepted as being exceptional; they did not become the rule. We failed to reform schools, colleges, and universities by our example, and, in retrospect, we were foolish to think that we could. Schools and universities should be more responsive to their customers, and some are certainly trying to be, but they cannot be all things to all people.

What was always needed, and what we lacked, was a responsive, learner centred, community based, flexible adult education system complementary to the high school and post-secondary systems; a system of moving someone, should they be so moved, from literacy training to post-secondary education without barriers.

The centres, taken as a whole, are very close to providing that complementary system, and their potential for so doing is enormous.

What this can mean for Manitoba, for the first time, is the ability to say to any learner, no matter where he/she may be starting from, we now have an educational system in this province that will allow your ability and commitment to be the only limits of your educational potential.

Providing educational opportunity in a manner in which people are encouraged rather than discouraged can transform an individual's life. The social and economic benefits for our society as a whole are equally positive. If the education goal of the government was to produce the greatest number of well qualified, well educated Manitobans as possible, the adult learning centres would be seen as an indispensable part of the system for achieving that goal.